

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

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SUBJECT: LABOR UNREST IN MARTINIQUE

1. SINCE FEB. 1, SOME 6,000 CONSTRUCTION AND PUBLIC WORKS EMPLOYEES HAVE BEEN ON STRIKE IN MARTINIQUE, DEMANDING A MONTHLY TRANSPORTATION ALLOWANCE OF FIFTY FRANCS AND A LENGTH OF SERVICE ALLOWANCE. THE PRINCIPAL TRADE UNIONS INVOLVED ARE THE CGT (CONFEDERATION FRANCAISE DES TRAVAILLEURS CHRETIENS). AN AGREEMENT WAS REACHED ON FEB 16 BETWEEN THE TRADE UNIONS AND THE EMPLOYERS REPRESENTING LARGE ENTERPRISES (SYNDICAT DE GROS ENTREPRENEURS), BUT THAT AGREEMENT WAS REJECTED BY THE UNION OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES (PME) ON THE GROUNDS IT HAD NOT BEEN REPRESENTED AT THE MEETING.

2. THE PME COUNTERED WITH A DEMAND AIMED AT THE PREFECTURE THAT THE GOF MAKE CERTAIN ALLOWANCES FOR THE EMPLOYERS TO ENABLE THEM TO MEET THE WORKERS' DEMANDS WITHOUT UNDULY SQUEEZING THEIR PROFIT MARGIN. ALTHOUGH THE PREFECTURE INDICATED A WILLINGNESS TO MEET THE PME'S DEMANDS, A MEETING ON MARCH 1 AT THE PREFECTURE BETWEEN THE TRADE UNIONS AND THE PME ENDED INCONCLUSIVELY, AND THE TRADE UNIONS MOUNTED SEVERAL DEMONSTRATIONS IN THE STREETS OF FORT-DE-FRANCE THAT SAME DAY.

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3. ON THE FOLLOWING DAY (MARCH 2), SEVERAL HUNDRED DEMONSTRATORS BUILT BARRICADES IN THE STREET OUT OF STONES, BRANCHES AND OLD CARS. IN SOME SPOTS, FIREMEN WERE CALLED UPON TO EXTINGUISH SMALL FIRES. A NUMBER OF DEMONSTRATORS RAN THROUGH THE STREETS OF DOWNTOWN FORT-DE-FRANCE WITH CLUBS, FORCING RETAILERS WHO REMAINED OPEN TO CLOSE THEIR STORES, AND AT LEAST ONE EMPLOYEE

WAS INJURED. FRENCH AUTHORITIES, HOWEVER, HAVE MADE A STUDIED EFFORT NOT TO INTERVENE WITH POLICE FOR FEAR OF CAUSING A CONFRONTATION BETWEEN THE LATTER AND THE TRADE UNIONS.

4. ON MARCH 3, MICHEL RENARD, PRESIDENT OF THE PME AND CANDIDATE OPPOSING AIME CESAIRE FOR THE ASSEMBLY SEAT WHICH THE LATTER NOW HOLDS (SEE MARTINIQUE 131) NEGOTIATED WITH THE PREFECT AND OBTAINED AN AGREEMENT TO THE PME'S DEMANDS, WHICH CENTERED ON A REDUCTION IN EMPLOYERS' SOCIAL SECURITY PAYMENTS ON BEHALF OF THEIR EMPLOYEES.

5. ON MARCH 4, BOTH THE PME AND THE GROS ENTREPRENEURS WERE READY TO SIGN AN AGREEMENT GIVING THE TRADE UNIONS WHAT THEY HAD ORIGINALLY DEMANDED. THE TRADE UNIONS MAINTAINED, HOWEVER, THAT THE AGREEMENT REACHED WITH THE GROS ENTREPRENEURS ON FEB 16 SHOULD HAVE BEEN HONORED AND THAT IF IT HAD BEEN HONORED THEY WOULD NOT HAVE LOST THE WORKDAYS SINCE THAT DATE ON STRIKE. THEY THUS DEMANDED TO BE PAID FOR THE DAYS THEY WERE OUT ON STRIKE SINCE THE 16TH. THE MEETING OF MARCH 4 THEN ENDED WITHOUT AGREEMENT, AND A GENERAL STRIKE WAS CALLED FOR MARCH 7.

6. THE GENERAL STRIKE HAS CLOSED DOWN COMMERCIAL OPERATIONS IN FORT-DE-FRANCE TODAY AND HAS LEFT ALL BUT THE HOSPITALS WITHOUT ELECTRICITY. JOINING THE CGT AND THE CFTEC IN THE STRIKE ARE UNIONS REPRESENTING UTILITY AND HOSPITAL WORKERS, PUBLIC HEALTH WORKERS, GARBAGE COLLECTORS AND TEACHERS. A GENERALLY LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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ORDERLY PARADE OF DEMONSTRATORS PASSED THROUGH THE STREETS (AND BY THE CONSULATE) DEMANDING THAT THE EMPLOYERS "HONOR THEIR SIGNATURES."

7. THE STRIKE COULD CONTINUE UNTIL THE FIRST ROUND OF THE GENERAL ELECTION ON MARCH 12. IF SO, THE CHAOS AND INCONVENIENCE COULD COST CESAIRE'S PPM (PARTI PROGRESSISTE DE LA MARTINIQUE) AT THE POLLS, ASSUMING THAT THE LEFT IS BLAMED FOR THE STRIKE AND THE MAYOR'S OFFICE (CESAIRE IS ALSO MAYOR OF FORT-DE-FRANCE) FOR NOT CONTROLLING IT. RENARD, ON THE OTHER HAND, HAS EMERGED FROM THE STRIKE AS A SHREWD POLITICIAN. STILL, CESAIRE IS FAVORED TO RETAIN HIS ASSEMBLY SEAT.
ROBINSON

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